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ABSTRACT

At Massachusetts Bay Community College a course was designed to create a transition from the process-based basic writing course to the traditional required freshman English course. WTG 100 was designed as an inquiry into academic writing, where students would learn about the various discourse conventions and expectations they would encounter as students. The educators also wanted to build students' awareness of a variety of discourse communities outside academia and empower them to know that their personal forms of discourse were as valid as others. By putting students in the role of researcher, educators hope to bring students' knowledge and identities to the forefront of the course. The primary goals of the course are to recognize the existence of various forms of academic discourse and personal discourse and analyze and understand how and when to use each. The course requires students to write six essays exploring various uses of language. Students also keep journals where they respond to required and personally chosen reading and analyze what they have learned about their own writing processes and use of language. By predicating the course on the idea of many discourse communities fraught with contradictions, the educators hoped to create initial, as opposed to resultant, confusion which would change by the end of the semester to acceptance, if not complete understanding. (MG)

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Understanding Discourse Communities

Through Active Inquiry

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Understanding Discourse Communities

Through Active Inquiry

Premise:

If students become active and are urged to investigate how and why language is used in academia they will become more fluent writers in the community of academic discourse. If they view their inquiry as a search for techniques, answers and ideas which will serve to aid them in classes and education outside of required writing courses, they will become more involved in the understanding and application of these techniques, answers and ideas.

Problem:

Like many open enrollment schools, Massachusetts Bay Community College (MBCC) is faced with students of diverse and often divergent abilities. Placing these students into appropriate entry-level writing courses modeled after the limited remedial models developed in selected institutions was challenging. Using results of student performance on the American College Testing ASSET test as a placement criterion accurately placed only students scoring at the very high or low end of the scale. For an institution with a relatively homogenous student body, this gross distinction is workable because according to this model, remedial programs are a way of allowing students who fall slightly below entry standards to improve their abilities to a level consistent with the mainstream students. Unfortunately though, at least 60% of our heterogeneous students scored in the mid-range and our placement of those students was difficult. Experience suggested that these students would have difficulty in Freshman English 101

and faculty teaching those courses agreed, often redirecting the students to the basic writing course (Andrien). Yet, many of the mid-scoring students placed in our basic course often moved quickly through the course. We realized that what we needed was an additional level, a mid-course so to speak, where this unreliable middle could be placed. The design and success of this course is the topic of this essay.

MBCC now has five entry-level writing courses: ESL 095, ESL 100, WTG 090, WTG 100, and ENG 101. A student is placed into one of these courses based on results of the ASSET and a holistically scored writing sample.

Course Design:

WTG 100, College Writing, began as a one section experiment in the Spring of 1988. Now it is the most heavily populated writing course. It was designed to create a transition from the process-based basic writing course to the traditional required freshman English course. The design of the course took into account three major factors.

1. Our students were unaware of particular discourse forms and of the conventions within the forms;
2. often they had been told their own discourse forms were less than appropriate; and
3. many had resigned themselves to passive roles to get by and do what the teacher wanted because passivity <u>was</u> what the teacher wanted.

The conventions of academic discourse

We knew from experience that oftentimes students who successfully completed WTG 090, the basic writing course, had difficulties in other courses. Although they became more fluent writers and understood the mechanics of the writing process, there seemed to be a gap between the "expressive-to-transactional" writing (Britton) done in WTG 090 and the kinds of discourse required in other fields. And although ENG 101 introduced students to various rhetorical modes of writing, students were faltering in courses where grades were often based on the conventions inherent in their particular discourse communities because students were constantly "reinventing the university" (Bartholomae, 134). This reinvention seemed to occur continuously, for neither the basic writing course nor the regular freshman course introduced students to academic discourse forms other than those normally found in a writing course.

With this particular problem in mind, we wanted to design WTG 100 as an inquiry into academic writing, where students would learn about the various discourse conventions and expectations they would encounter as students at Mass Bay. In other words, we wanted to create an entrance to academia for developmental students, to open this community to them, because we agreed with Rose who wrote:

> Nothing is more exclusive than the academic club; its language is highbrow, it has funny badges, and it worships tradition. It limits itself to a few participants who prefer to talk to each other (58).

Individual Discourse:

However, while we recognized the necessity of initiating our students into a variety of discourse forms, we did not want to limit ourselves to academic discourse alone. We also wanted to build our students' awareness of a variety of discourse communities outside academia

and empower them to know, beyond doubt, that their personal forms of discourse were as valid as others.

What we were trying to do was create a language community (Bizzel, 297), not just a discourse community. We wanted our students to see "the relation between dialect, discourse conventions, and ways of thinking" (297). We recognized that asking students to see the relationship was expecting a lot, particularly of students who, for the most part, had little confidence in their ability as students, let alone in their ability as writers. But it was precisely because of this lack of confidence that we wanted them to see the relationships. For, if they could see that even in the academic world, various dialects exist, perhaps they would begin to understand that language could be a tool used for learning, rather than a tool to only show one is "learned." Through this understanding, we wanted them to experience what Rose did: "some tentative recognitions than an engagement with ideas could foster competence and lead [them] out into the world" (47). And perhaps this recognition could come sooner if students realized their own language had as much right to exist as did the language of math, sociology, history, English. Perhaps by determining the worth of each of the many communities, they would begin to understand more ways of thinking and, with this, would understand the importance of audience in any discourse community.

We realized, though, that if we asked our students to look at language use in a variety of contexts they would find "masses of contradictions" which we would need to "accustom ourselves [and them] to [deal] with... instead of seeking a theory that appears to abrogate them (Bizzel, "What...," 18-19). Because we were convinced that students would find the contradictions on their own, we built the idea of them into the course in hopes of using them to our advantage. Rather than basing the course on a theory of academic writing which instructors would convey to students, we acknowledged that no one theory would be applicable to all discourse

communities. Instead, by basing the course on the discovery of contradictions we could broaden our students' exposure to the variety of discourse conventions and ask them to come to terms with the conventions and the contradictions.

Active Inquiry:

However, counting on students to uncover the contradictions on which we hoped to base the class would require their active participation. Not only would they be expected to write, they would have to conduct research. They would have to read, interview, analyze and synthesize. We were going to challenge the students' views of themselves and of language. Hopefully, in doing so a number of questions would be raised:

> What interpretive communities do we mean by teaching writing and what discursive practices characterize such communities? how do such communities produce and
>
> authorize knowledge that's acceptable to the community? what are the structures of power and authority that govern the production and circulation of texts within such communities (Trimbur).

Hoping that students themselves would raise these questions and realizing that "these questions assume we can't teach literacy in any pure or unadulterated sense but that reading and writing always take place within social and cultural contexts" (Trimbur), we would have no passive learners for their would be really nothing that we would teach. We could guide and we could suggest, but the guidance and the suggestions would only be appropriate when asked for because to succeed in the course requires the activity of questioning.

By putting the students in the role of researcher, we were hoping to bring their knowledge and identities to the forefront of the course. Basing the course on our students' knowledge and their ability to teach themselves, we hoped to build on Robert Brooke's idea of "underlife" where " the activities [these] individuals engage in to show their identities are different from or more complex than the identities an organization assigns to them" (145). In other words, although the

course would need to suffer with the "developmental" label, we would expect non-developmental work. We would ask the students "to think in ways other than those expected in the [remedial] classroom" (148). By assigning two disparate labels to the members of class we were hopeful that the students would see the initial contradiction and prove themselves capable of more complex identities than they had previously assumed with "developmental" labels. We were attempting to create a course where students would demonstrate their own identities, build on these identities, and learn where these identities fit in the academic community. Or as Joseph Harris suggested, we would "encourage [them] towards a kind of polyphony--an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses that make up their own" (17).

We have had a fair amount of success with this approach even though our students are not honors students. They are certainly baffled when they begin the course, but most basic writing students are not stupid. Although initially ignorant of the conventions and worth of academic discourse, they become aware that the role of passive learner must be shed if they hope to determine the conventions and worth of their own discourse. And since the search is the requirement of this required course, and since their grade is at stake, the students fulfill their student role and do what is expected. Many even learn to become enthusiastic.

The primary goals of the course are to recognize the existence of various forms of academic discourse and personal discourse and analyze and understand how and when to use each. To encourage active inquiry on the part of the students the course poses such questions as:

> What similarities and differences exist between oral and written language?
>
> What kinds of discourse are important in your major field?
>
> How is "good writing" defined by professionals in your field?
>
> How does that definition compare to other fields or professions?

How does it compare to your own idea?

How can you discover the expectations of readers in your field and in other situations?

How can you meet those expectations?

To answer the questions, the students are urged to analyze oral and written discourse in many contexts: the writing class, the hallway, home, work, biology lab, the president's office. To achieve the analysis they must listen, read, talk, and think. They must write, only to discover that "appropriating a style and making it [their] own is difficult, and [they] will miss the mark a thousand times along the way" (Rose, 54). But, so too, they will realize that "the botched performances...are part of it all and developing writers will go through them if they are able to write for people who care about language...(54). And in this writing class, a language community, filled with people struggling to discover some answers to questions that you and I as professionals are still asking, these developmental writers will have found people who care about the **kinds** of language used.

Course Requirements:

The course requires students to write six essays exploring various uses of language. Students also keep journals where they respond to required and personally chosen reading and analyze what they have learned about their own writing processes and use of language. Early on, they begin to understand the importance of audience because several of their papers are read and commented on, not only by their classmates and instructor, but also by faculty and staff outside the classroom. The outside readers give the students the sense that people apart from the writing class are concerned, not only about their language use, but also the ideas they are conveying with their language. Thus, important dialogue is opened between students and

educators in a variety of areas, expanding on the idea of community.

Because revision is an integral part of the writing and learning process, early in the semester students are introduced to word-processing. Although this foray into technology is met with some resistance, it does not take long for even the most recalcitrant student to understand the uses of word-processing. Once they feel competent with keyboard manipulations, students who previously found it difficult to revise for content (adopting the belief "I-said-what-I-wanted-to-the-way-I-wanted-to"), begin to find themselves adding examples and illustrations to essays almost instinctively. Because there is no painful recopying, adding and deleting information in attempts to reach an audience becomes purposeful rather than drudgery.

By the time students have written two and a half or three essays, they take a midterm modeled after Edward White's assessments. All students in all writing courses take the same midterm which is later holistically scored by instructors and staff in the division. The midterm serves two purposes. First, it gives the students an opportunity to see how their timed work is perceived by others, further strengthening the ideas of audience and communities. Secondly, the midterm helps students to prepare for the final external assessment which consists of two parts: a holistically scored two-period essay test and a holistically scored portfolio consisting of three papers chosen by the student.

At the University of Utah, five freshman in an honors writing class were members of a course similar to this. It was their goal to observe "how students and teachers used language and valued specific language interaction in courses across the curriculum" (Miller, 11). They reached an important conclusion: they discovered that many classroom cultures defined "both learning and academic literacy very differently than [their] writing course had" (11). Their professor, Susan Miller, responded to the students' discovery by realizing that her course, which emphasized "sharing and productive disagreement" as a way to become independently

knowledgeable was the reverse of other introductory level courses. This realization brought another issue to bear: by participating in her course, her students were being prepared. perhaps, for upper-level seminars but not for the courses preceding them (30). Miller concludes by saying:

> I am left with an awareness of unrecognized problems that tie my course, and perhaps others, to a limited vision of academic literacy that is simultaneously too uninformed and idealistic about, and too alienated from, the multi-cultural, multi-leveled settings in which literacy has purchase. In the past, 'rhetorical analysis' of purpose and audience was taught to elitist students who, like these students, would easily gain equality in the discourse communities that they were entitled to join because they already participated in the social subtexts of those communities. But if I am to convey this sense of entitlement to **all** students, I must reconsider encouraging their isolation by imagining my community as a privileged 'center' that will foster proper writerly alienation from or superiority to other situations that students encounter. Better assuming the confidence that the less well-prepared students need may require that I instead define 'rhetorical analyses' more broadly as a way to uncover traditional public roles and values that we and those in other disciplines foster in concrete academic settings (30-31).

Miller certainly required activity of her students and they did discover discourse communities. Unfortunately, they were left confused by the polyphony--the absence of a pure academic discourse community. By prefacing our course on the idea of many discourse communities fraught with contradictions, we hoped to create initial, as opposed to resultant, confusion which would change by the end of the semester to acceptance if not complete understanding. For if the students left our course accepting the right of communities retaining their own form of discourse, they would be way ahead of Miller's elitist students. Our students would know that in certain situations they would be better off to use language for "traditional public roles" than they would to be alienate themselves from it by their form of discourse.

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